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Professors Who Play Politics

When professors play politics, the bitterness is often inversely proportional to the stakes. That was the case when some scientists recently denied Prof. Samuel Huntington of Harvard membership in the National Academy of Sciences.

Actually, Huntington's vocation, properly pursued, makes him unsuited to the academy as it evidently wants to be understood. And his civic virtue would make him uncomfortable in the academy as it is currently composed.

Huntington is a distinguished political scientist who has served several presidents in national-security capacities, and his critics say he has committed other sins too. He and a colleague recently published a scholarly article, "Dead Dictators and Rioting Mobs: Does the Demise of Authoritarian Rulers Lead to Political Instability," and did not note that the CIA helped fund the research. A scandal, no?

No. The CIA had a rule (now modified) against acknowledgment of support. The CIA has good reasons for not advertising its interests, and there are people eager to infer that if the CIA is interested in the consequences of dictators' deaths, it is interested in causing such deaths.

This article, as well as his support for the Vietnam War and his "conservatism" (he is a Hubert Humphrey Democrat) were important catalysts of opposition within the academy. However, there also was the argument that "soft" scientists (social scientists such as political scientists) do not belong in the academy with "hard" scientists such as physicists and mathematicians.

It is reasonable to suspect this argument was in part a cloak for political opposition, given that there are 177 social scientists among the academy's 1,462 members. Opposition to Huntington was led by a passionate left-wing mathematician whose criticisms of Huntington's mathematical methodology were refuted by Herbert Simon, a Nobel laureate in economics.

Were Huntington's "hard" science opponents really interested in distinguishing themselves from social scientists, their position might be supported by some political scientists (including one lapsed professor of political science: me). Many political scientists do frame their research so the results can be reduced to arithmetic expressions that suggest explanatory or predictive powers comparable to the laws of physics or other generalizations of the natural sciences.

Prof. Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago rightly says the issue is whether this leads to distortions of social phenomena, or the neglect of

phenomena that cannot be mathematized, or the construction of mathematical models unrelated to the real world. Political science is divided between those who are enthusiasts of science and those who are interested in politics.

Many "behavioral" approaches are political science with a political agenda, albeit one understood dimly, if at all, by most practitioners. Behavioralism aims to explain the political order in terms of nonpolitical causes (economic, psychological or others), rather than the core concerns of political philosophy—convictions about and desires for freedom, equality, honor, distinction, justice.

Contemporary political science is a tossed salad of psychology, sociology, economics, decision theory. And over in a quiet corner is political philosophy—the contemplative life that is political science as Aristotle understood it.

Political philosophy, properly undertaken, is political because its subject is law-giving to achieve justice. It is science in that it involves the incorporation of empirical findings to facilitate the achievement of proper goals.

However, much modern political science is different, and its aim and the aim of modern politics coincide.

The aim of modern politics, from Machiavelli on, has been to simplify politics by orienting it, away from ideals of excellence and nobility, to low but solid passions and goals. Modern politics conceives of man not as a political creature fulfilled by life in a well-ordered polity, but as a solitary "self," and it aims only to regulate selfishness. If selfishness always is—or can be encouraged to be—a constant powerful force, like planetary gravity, then a science of politics, comparable to Newtonian physics, is achievable.

Huntington, a political scientist who understands the irreducibly philosophical nature of his vocation, should be content to leave the academy to the "hard" scientists whose vocations, although dignified, are different. However the academy, by the undignified political bigotry that was a component of its action against Huntington, calls into question its fitness, and that of its subordinate organization, the National Research Council, to receive public funds for research projects that result in advice on public policies.

The academy was founded during the Civil War to advise the government in military-engineering problems. Since then, there seems to have developed an inverse relationship between the technical virtuosity and civic virtue of the scientists controlling the academy.